

There is a country twang reverberating in the national blood stream at the moment. Resurgent interest in the American West has mainstreamed country music, drawn ever-larger crowds to the Buffalo Bill and Gene Autry museums, and landed Clint Eastwood two Oscars for his *Unforgiven* in 1992. One of the entrepreneurs who is clearly "Back in the Saddle Again" with this recurrent attention to cowboys and country lifestyles is Gibbs Smith, Publisher.

For the past 24 years, Smith and his team—now grown to 22—have strived to carve out a unique niche in the national and international book markets while operating far from America's publishing citadel, New York City. The company, originally known as Peregrine Press (from the wanderings or "peregrinations" recounted by Jack London in *The Road*, one of the firm's first four publications), moved from Santa Barbara to Layton, Utah in 1973. "Electronic communication technologies give us the freedom to do what we want, where we want," says Smith. "They allow our designers and editors to interface easily with other designers around the country, send and receive type from typesetters, and even

transmit finished books in electronic format to printers all over the world." From its rural setting, this far-sighted company is plugged into the global village while avoiding the steep overhead of New York City.

Not that he's down on big cities. Smith is in New York regularly and enjoys it, recognizing the advantages of talking face to face with authors, agents and other publishers over lunch. "But," adds Smith, "I'm a Westerner, and believe what I do from the West is part of the cultural maturation of the West." The responsibilities of the modern publisher—choosing what to publish; editing; designing; managing all aspects of manufacturing; marketing; attending to business relationships; and above all, supporting the intellectual and artistic creativity necessary to produce high quality books—have led Gibbs Smith to become a new kind of Western pioneer.

Publishers skills, defined by historian Ruari McLean as including "charm, financial acumen, a knowledge of the future,

a stony heart and a very rich wife," have changed significantly since their 18th century origins. Now linked to the graphic arts community through electronic communication networks, modern publishers are a prime example of an industry helping to usher in the information age. For some, new electronic formats have become a publishing option, but for most the book remains a constant. "I think printed books will always be with us," reflects Smith, himself the author of *Joe Hill*, the definitive

GIBBS SMITH

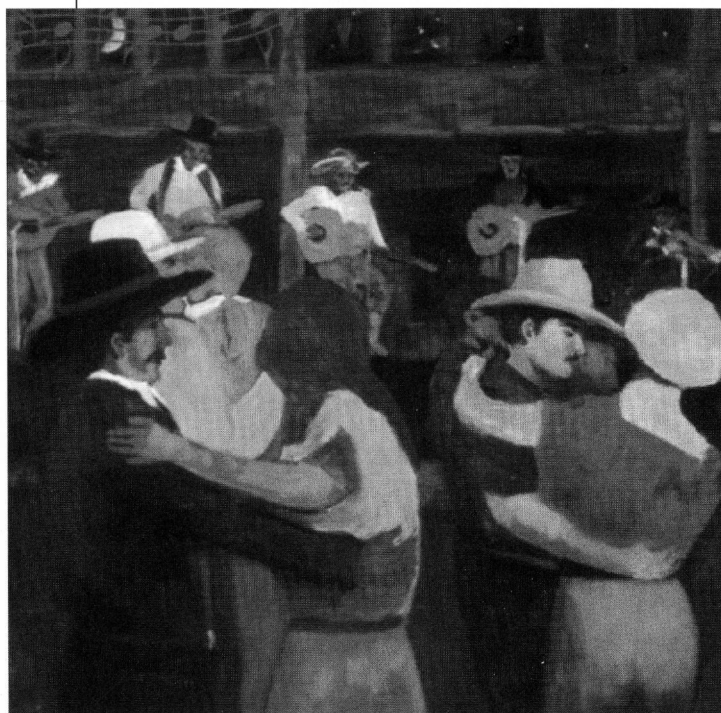
PROGRESSIVE PUBLISHER

by Randy Silverman

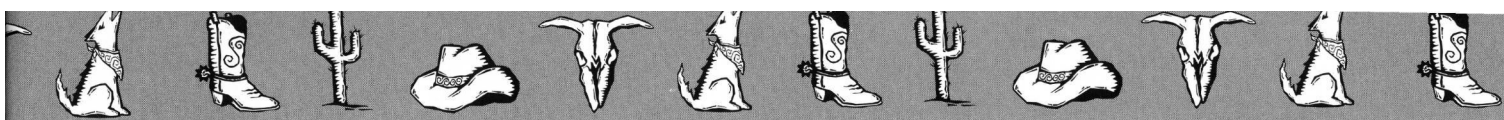
history of an American labor leader and song writer executed in Salt Lake City in 1915. "They contain certain qualities lacking on computer video display screens. The smell, texture and feel of books, the pleasure and portability, and the desire to preserve the tradition of the printed text all ensure that books as we know them will be traveling with us on the electronic highway."

With more and more authors producing manuscripts on computer terminals rather than from conventional typewriters, securing a foothold in an electronic medium makes economic sense. Lyle Mumford, salesman for Publishers Press, Salt Lake City, notes he'll be electronically producing upcoming titles from Gibbs Smith's spring list, "going straight from their disk or cartridge to signature-imposed film, ready for making proofs and plates. We're able to work both in black and white and color," notes Mumford. "Scanning and placing the halftone illustrations electronically, they don't even need stripping anymore."

Does electronic pre-press mean some traditional trades will be die out, casualties along the side of the electronic highway? Will strippers become the hand composers of tomorrow? "Not necessarily," predicts Mumford, "if strippers have the flexibility to learn new skills. I see electronic pre-press as just another tool that needs mastering, like the Exacto knife and ruby-lith. People with computer backgrounds may understand the software and love to design things on the terminal, but some of the conventional stripping issues can throw them. Understanding choke and spread, the importance of screen angles, and some



Ian performing at Cowboy Dance, Nevada, Gibbs M. Smith, oil on canvas.



of the practical knowledge that strippers were trained to master are still valued expertise." Given the profession's rapid state of evolution, a stripper who is not afraid to get behind a computer terminal possesses an ideal combination of 21st Century skills. "The software is there to be manipulated," says Mumford, "but unless you understand certain technical relationships you may design a piece that looks great on the screen but won't work once it converts to film and is set onto a printing press."

Within this fast-paced environment, what motivates Gibbs Smith, Publisher to produce the thought-provoking commercial offerings that have become the company's trademark? Why publish *Children of a Lesser God* or *Language of the Robe*, a history of the Native American trade blanket? "We have some feeling for everything we publish," explains Smith. "Because there have been so few national publishing houses located outside of New York City, we also have a mission. We may choose to do a book on cowboy boots or bandannas, but our market remains international; and our intent is to contribute to the quality of life."

Smith's commitment to quality is evident in the details of his publications, which are often opulent color productions. The company delights in filling in cultural gaps with works ranging from the letters of Impressionist Camille Pissarro to the first illustrated history of Utah Art, or the compendium of Yoko Ono's avant garde art work. "Personally, I've always believed you've got to care about what you do beyond the business side of it," reflects Smith, who from the start was heavily influenced by publisher Alfred Knopf's commitment to quality. Inspired by encouragement he received from the man he considers his mentor, even the covers of Smith's semi-annual catalogs reflect his personalized attention to detail, sporting color reproductions of his oil paintings.

Permanence and durability are other quality issues. "After putting so much effort into the production of a fine book, we are concerned with its longevity," says Smith. "We always use acid-free paper if we can get it and when it's appropriate. The quality of the paper we choose is also

critical to fine black and white or color reproductions, and critical to the aesthetic success of our works. Creating a book is so difficult and important, that we never begin a project without the long view in mind."

Smith's commitment to environmental preservation is evident in his portfolio. Numerous titles exude his passion for environmental causes, and he served as chair of the Utah chapter of the Sierra Club from 1986-1991. Works by Henry David Thoreau, John Muir and John Nichols (of *Milagro Beanfield War* fame); *Coyote's Canyon* by Terry Tempest Williams and John Telford; and *Blessed by Light*, which captures the pristine desert wilderness of America's Southwest, would complement any carefully developed library. They are not, however, always profitable to produce. "The trick is to discipline oneself according to the market," says Smith. "Probably to our fault, if we really love a piece, despite its limited sales potential, we often go ahead and publish it."

Shooting from the heart has paid off. Smith's publishing house now sells \$4,000,000 in books a year. "When we began," he remembers, "friends with the same amount of education as I had were making big money, while I struggled to live on \$300 a month. Breaking into publishing is very difficult; you have to pay the price." Even for those with the desire, the elements that comprise a successful publisher remain amorphous and can only be mastered through experience. Hard knocks and team work have rewarded Smith for his knowledge of the market, diverse and varied interests, and a highly developed sense of aesthetic awareness.

By employing quality off-shore printers from Hong Kong, Singapore and Korea, his full-color work is competitively priced. In the manufacture of textbooks or for jobs requiring rapid turn-around, Smith has worked for over twenty years with Publisher's Press and Mountain States Bindery of Salt Lake City. "They've



Jimmy and Linda at Buffalo Bill Museum, Wyoming, Gibbs M. Smith, oil on canvas.

done great work for us," comments Smith, "and both remain very important to our company."

Fittingly, a large part of Smith's current focus revolves around Western themes—*Cowboy High Style*; *The Cowboy Boot Book*; *100 Years of Western Wear*; *Don't Squat With Your Spurs On*—and reflects Smith's ability to forecast current trends. Even his office in a converted 80-year old barn amid acres of Davis County farm land reflects Smith's aesthetic sense of Western culture. A steady flow of Western material issues forth peppered with the sage humor of cowboy philosophers like Texas Bix Bender who notes, "The biggest liar you'll ever have to deal with probably watches you shave his face in the mirror every morning."

Taken as a whole, the activities of this distinctly Western publishing house must be viewed against a national backdrop. "We are part of the larger book community that includes printers, binders, libraries, authors, sales reps and book stores," says Smith. "It has taken us years to make book markets around the world comfortable with the fact that we can deliver national books from the West." This goal continues to grow and bear fruit. Attention to quality, the application of good taste and a commitment to fair pricing have earned Gibbs Smith, Publisher a place in the sun that still looks out over an open field. **GAJ**